

Defying the fourth commandment

A paper on the place of shields and coats of arms in flags

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I am sure that if you are reading this, you have already read the pamphlet by the NAVA (North American Vexillological Association) and Ted Kaye, “Good Flag Bad Flag”, and even its lesser-known sequel “Modern Flag Design” (links to both books at the end of the article). And if you haven't read them, these pamphlets essentially outline what Ted Kaye calls the “Principles of good flag design”; which are five:

- 1. Keep it simple**
- 2. Use meaningful symbolism**
- 3. Use two or three basic colours**
- 4. No lettering or seals**
- 5. Be distinctive or be related**

These five principles have become as rules in the vexillological community, being considered as commandments (thereby the title). Well in this article I am going to “defy” that fourth commandment: “No lettering or seals”.

But before getting into my own opinion, we have to talk about the demographics of vexillology. I think that it is undeniable to anyone initiated in this world of vexillology that it is dominated by English-speakers, it's not negative in any way or form, but there are many more Americans, English, Australians and New Zealanders than from any other place. And from this dominating sector, the majority of people passionate about vexillology are concretely American. With this established, it's easy to see how much importance the people give to that fourth principle of vexillology. They're traumatised. The experience of the American municipal flag experience is truly traumatising for someone passionate about flags.

But to say the truth, the European municipal flags are also traumatising in the same sense the American municipal flags are traumatising: they have coats of arms. We have to make a distinction between coats of arms and seals. In America it is far more common the practice of “seals”, which are always round and usually have the name of the locality, state, and so on, which it represents and usually have beautifully complex illustrations in them; this differentiates the American seals from the more traditional European coats of arms, which are also very complex heraldic symbols that represent a person, family or place. Meanwhile none of them are appropriate in a flag, coats of arms “the European way” are more acceptable.

What I intend to do in this text, to the best of my abilities, moderate the debate around the fourth principle. And to demonstrate in some way how heraldry and vexillology can collaborate so that coats of arms may have a place in flags.

But before I get started, I completely agree that words, in any way, shape or form, belong on flags; they destroy the whole purpose of flags and a lot has been written about this. Neither do seals (which we have distinguished previously) belong on flags, as they were made to be on paper, close to the face, and they do a great work at that, but not on cloth 100 metres away.

Personally it makes me sad to see so much hate towards seals and coats of arms, and as I have described before, I can comprehend the trauma that these flags produce, and I am in favour of the many redesign efforts many people are undertaking, but from a theoretical-vexillological point of view, flags and coats of arms should collaborate.

First of all, in the case of America, whatever be it the heraldic authority must collaborate with individual and societies to mutually improve the symbology of the regions they represent, as well to find a middle point between a very simplified version of a seal (in the future we'll see if that is even possible). In the case of Europe, I think that using already existing symbols or even "amplifying" a coat of arms to a flag may improve the vexillological scene quickly and effectively.

For too long the sciences and arts heraldry and vexillology have been at odds with each other, or being subordinated to each other. I doubt this paper has any effect, but I'd like to think that in the future we'll see a deep collaboration between both sciences for the common good of the symbology of our communities.

[Here's](#) the Spanish version of this paper.

Interesting links:

[Good Flag, Bad Flag - North American Vexillological Association](#)

[Modern Flag Design](#)